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Marion County coroner's reforms get good reviews

Prosecutor and police say the office has become more efficient

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After several years of careening from one problem to another, the Marion County coroner's office has taken a number of steps to get its house in order under Dr. Frank Lloyd.

First, Lloyd passed a state certification test that former Coroner Ken Ackles failed, which had led to the suspension of Ackles' paychecks and his withdrawal from the 2008 election.

Lloyd has also cut in half or more the time needed to process critical paperwork, a problem he pledged to improve during the campaign.

He said death certificates, which families need to settle property and insurance matters, are now completed in 11 to 14 days, compared with 35 days when he took over.

And he said autopsy reports, which police and prosecutors use in homicide cases, are now ready in 30 days or less, compared with 90 days in the past.

Several agencies and businesses that rely on the coroner's office, such as the county prosecutor and funeral homes, confirmed that waiting times are down.

"In the past, I told families it might take six to eight weeks to get a death certificate, but no one is complaining now," said Jerri Clayton, senior vice president at Flanner & Buchanan Funeral Centers. "We used to have widows with their bank accounts frozen for weeks. It was a real tragedy."

County Prosecutor Carl Brizzi said cutting the time it takes to get an autopsy report has had a positive ripple effect in the criminal justice system. If prosecutors get the reports sooner, they can speed up cases, which helps move prisoners through the system and prevents jail crowding.

"The level of professionalism there is improving," Brizzi said. "This coroner comes in with a clean slate, and by all accounts has had a good start."

Capt. Mark Rice, supervisor of the homicide division at the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department, agreed with Brizzi's assessment. He said his officers are no longer hearing complaints from the families of homicide victims.

Lloyd hired an extra transcriptionist to type up autopsy reports, and deputy coroners now exchange documents with funeral homes and the Health Department by e-mail rather than through the post office.

He also changed the work schedule for deputy coroners to improve communication with families and other public agencies. The deputy coroners who conduct death investigations now work 12 hours on and 12 off; before, it was 24 hours on and 48 off.

"There was a little resistance because it took time to get used to it," Lloyd said.

Some of that resistance faded with the departures of two deputy coroners.

One glitch has marred the turnaround. In May, a deputy coroner hoisted the body of a 750-pound woman onto a flatbed wrecker with a chain, outraging her loved ones.

Lloyd said he has made changes to ensure that bodies are not mishandled again. Among them: the use of a proper lift mechanism.

What Lloyd has not done is clean house in an agency that was viewed as a disaster under Ackles. Lloyd's opponent in the race last year said the office needed a major overhaul. Lloyd also said as much.

The office had problems with theft of money and property from bodies; cremated a body without notifying the family; and was raided by the county prosecutor.

But a top-to-bottom overhaul, Lloyd decided, wasn't in order.

"After observing the office for a probationary period, I didn't have doubts (that any further actions needed to be taken)," Lloyd said. "I tend to make my own opinions."

Lloyd, meanwhile, is still dealing with lawsuits that date to Ackles' tenure.

Ackles, an African-American, was involved in at least four racial discrimination lawsuits from white employees. His former chief deputy won a judgment of \$430,000 last year, while two other former employees settled for \$50,000 each in the past two months. Another lawsuit by the former forensic pathologist is pending.

Lloyd, who also is African-American, said he did not think racial discrimination was the real problem in the coroner's office. "Obviously, there was a problem, but I don't know whether race was the issue," he said.

He said the city's legal department advised settling the cases to save money.

The biggest challenge today, Lloyd said, is money. The office requested \$3.5 million in its budget last year; it received about \$2.5 million.

Deliberations on a new budget for next year begin in August.

Additional Facts

MARION COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

Changes made under Dr. Frank Lloyd:

- » Accelerated processing for paperwork, cutting by half or more the time needed to deliver death certificates and autopsy reports.
- » Hired a transcriptionist to get through a backlog of autopsy reports.
- » Changed deputy coroners' work schedules to improve communication.
- » Sped up communication with other agencies and funeral homes by using e-mail.

CORONER'S OFFICE BY THE NUMBERS

29 -- number of employees.

\$2.5 million -- 2009 budget.

2,723 -- death investigations last year.

626 -- autopsies conducted last year.
